

21 March 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED  
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# The Billionaire, the Pro and the CIA

By JONATHAN KWITNY

Yet another book about Howard Hughes. Now, besides wondering how a guy as loony as Mr. Hughes was could be so successful, and why books about him sell so well, I must also wonder how author Michael Drosnin got his hands on at least some of the private, handwritten correspondence that was stolen in 1974 from Mr. Hughes's corporate office in Los Angeles. At the time of the theft, Mr. Hughes lay far away in the Bahamas, in one of a series of hotel suites where for the last



## Bookshelf

"Citizen Hughes"  
By Michael Drosnin

decade of his life he kept himself fenced off from the world by a few servants, naked, voluntarily bedridden, preoccupied with pumping codeine into himself, badgering subordinates to bribe anyone in their paths and insisting that they protect him from germs by using wads of Kleenex to touch anything that might touch him. It is this madness and corruption that Mr. Drosnin documents in "Citizen Hughes" (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 532 pages, \$18.95), which he says relies mainly on exclusive material. In an author's note, he writes: "This book is based primarily on nearly ten thousand previously hidden internal documents . . . all of which were stolen from" Mr. Hughes's headquarters.

This is followed by the most exciting part of the book, the 36-page introduction, wherein Mr. Drosnin tells of his bizarre and hair-raising chase through Southern California massage parlors and gun-filled garden apartments, leading to a man he calls "The Pro," a safecracker who allegedly carried out the raid on the Hughes office. The Pro, we are told, had been hired by strangers—maybe the CIA or Nixon operatives, maybe agents of Mr. Hughes himself trying to hide his own records from an SEC subpoena.

At any rate, Mr. Drosnin says, when The Pro learned in mid-heist that his

quarry was documents, not money, he turned his gun on his employers and took the documents, figuring to ransom them. But an intermediary he approached anonymously to seek the ransom called the police instead. When the ransom message was finally relayed it was rebuffed. Mr. Drosnin theorizes that this was because the secrets contained in the papers seemed safer from public disclosure while they remained with the thief than if they changed hands again. Possibly included among these secrets was evidence that the CIA had been entrusting the demented Mr. Hughes with its plans to capture a sunken Soviet submarine and to use the Mafia to kill Fidel Castro. No ransom payment was made, nor was The Pro ever caught.

But where all the government's men couldn't find The Pro, Mr. Drosnin says he did, and persuaded him to turn over the stolen documents for public disclosure. This leads to the best line in the book. The Pro asks Mr. Drosnin, "What does that make me? An investigative thief?"

Mr. Drosnin says "personal problems" caused the eight-year delay between receipt of the documents and publication of "Citizen Hughes." He denies gossip that the statute of limitations on receiving stolen property had anything to do with it. Unfortunately, Mr. Drosnin asks us to take a lot of things on faith. The Pro still insists on being an anonymous source.

Mr. Drosnin is identified in publicity as a former Wall Street Journal reporter. He turns out to have worked for this newspaper for eight months in 1970-71, and he and his former supervisors express disdain for each other's work habits, though nothing serious is alleged on either side.

Mr. Drosnin's next milestone was a cocaine bust with Abbie Hoffman in 1973. He talked himself out of being indicted, saying he was only on the scene to write a story for Harper's magazine, whose editor confirms this, though no story was ever published. Then came an assignment for New Times magazine to write about the Hughes heist, which Mr. Drosnin says led him to the 10,000 documents, and "Citizen Hughes." In three hours in his sparsely furnished Soho loft, Mr. Drosnin convincingly demonstrated that he has a lot of Hughes-written documents whose only apparent source would be the 1974 robbery. This certainly isn't a hoax a la Clifford Ir-

ving, who went to jail a decade ago for forging Mr. Hughes's handwriting to sell a bogus Hughes autobiography.

But for all his protestations that almost everything is new and original, much of the contents of his book will be familiar to followers of the Hughes literature. Dozens of documents, some quoted at length, appeared in the acclaimed 1979 Hughes biography "Empire" by Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele of the Philadelphia Inquirer.

What may be the book's most sensational episode—Mr. Hughes's attempt before Robert Kennedy's body was cold to hire away the Kennedy political organization—was revealed in Jim Hougan's 1978 book "Spooks" (if not elsewhere), though Mr. Drosnin does add two memos in Hughes's actual handwriting.

Responding to questions, Mr. Drosnin asserts that by his count 90% of his document quotations are fresh, though he agrees he doesn't distinguish in his text between what is new and what isn't. But his selection of passages for quotation and even his paraphrasing at times resemble that in "Empire." This certainly isn't enough to constitute plagiarism, but it seems enough to constitute a debt that Mr. Drosnin (who says he read "Empire") ought to acknowledge and doesn't.

"Citizen Hughes" is written in breezy best-sellerese, and where it repeats material in "Empire" it usually edits the material down for simplicity. It must be read with care, however, for the document notes in the back don't always cover the slambang assertions in the text. The text, for example, matter-of-factly reports that President Johnson was "in fact certain that the CIA had a hand in [John] Kennedy's assassination." The note in the back is of an FBI report of an interview with White House aide Marvin Watson, who said Mr. Johnson "felt that the CIA had something to do with this plot," and wanted more information. Many assertions have no clear source in the notes.

Mr. Drosnin's tendency to hype and overconclude leads to a gross mischaracterization of what he has found. He calls his Hughes documents "a coldblooded tale of an entire nation's corruption" and a picture of "the true nature of power in America." But from everything I've read here and elsewhere, Howard Hughes seems typical of absolutely nothing.

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